

***Understanding and enhancing
research-policy linkages in
Australian housing***

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Centre

Research-policy linkages project



Project description: Aim

- To understand and enhance research-policy linkages in Australian housing, with special reference to AHURI
 - ‘The idea that public policy should be informed by social science research is attractive in theory and elusive in practice’
 - Researchers and policy practitioners sometimes find the linkages frustrating and often disappointing
 - Are there better ways?

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Project description: Rationale

- This is AHURI's core business
- 'Continuous improvement' of practices within AHURI and housing research & policy communities
- The distinctive opportunities provided by AHURI to innovate in research-policy relations
- The need to base AHURI's practice on the body of 'evidence' in the international literature

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Project description: Method

- Comprehensive review of the international literature ('evidence base')
 - Discussion paper analysing literature of past 30 years
 - Over 120 items cited and history of the idea traced
- Workshops with AHURI researchers and policy practitioners
 - Two one-day workshops in November 2004 with AHURI researchers and housing policy practitioners
- Observations of AHURI at work

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Project description: Outputs and outcomes

- Discussion paper (2004) reviews the international literature and relevance to AHURI
- Options paper (2005) proposes a strategic direction, approaches and options for enhancing research policy-relations in Australian housing
- Research & Policy Bulletin (2005) summaries key findings

Outcomes: processes of discussion and consultation within AHURI leading to 'continuous improvement' of practices

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Project findings (1): 'This is disputed territory'

- *Champions* 'The social sciences can (and should) tell us what works and why'
- *Sceptics* 'Policy is irrational and political; research is ambiguous and inconclusive'
- *Reformers* "Research does not move mountains, but ... over time can reshape the policy terrain'

What aspirations for AHURI and Australian housing?

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Project findings (2): 'The three 'models' of research-policy linkages'

- ***The engineering model*** 'Research solves policy problems with empirical evidence'
- ***The enlightenment model*** 'Research undertaken in spirit of detachment and scepticism'
- ***The engagement model*** 'interactive relationship involving networks and partnerships'

Which model for AHURI and Australian housing?

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Project findings (3): 'Structures matter'

- **Conventional structures** 'Clear separation between producers (researchers) and users (policy participants)'
- **Network structures** 'Partnerships and policy communities that span the creation, validation and incorporation of research'

The more sustained and intense the interaction, the more likely there will be utilisation' – implications for AHURI?

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Project findings (4): 'The repertoire of innovative practices'

- Doing the right research and doing research right
- Synthesising research findings
- Communicating and disseminating research findings
- Bringing research into policy and political processes
- Developing the capacities of research users

What new practices should AHURI adopt?

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Project findings (5): AHURI researchers are ‘frustrated engagers’

Strong commitment to policy-relevant research

- AHURI presents key opportunities for engagement
- Impact of AHURI research is medium-term / indirect
- Partnership and collaboration are key
- Dissemination is important, but where do we find the time?

Summary: ‘They are motivated to engage closely with policy, but unclear about the best ways to do this effectively’

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Project findings (6): Policy practitioners are ‘aspirant engagers’

- Positive, yet pragmatic, orientation to research
- Research can and should contribute in many ways including ‘enlightenment’ and ‘engineering’
- Absorption and transmission as key problems
- Synthesis is a key challenge
- Relations with other policy actors is the key challenge
- Researchers need to better understand policy processes

Summary: Research is highly valued, but there is a need to re-examine and re-consider many established practices.

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Project implications (1): Strategic direction

‘AHURI should focus on developing structures and processes consistent with a **‘network’** organisation emphasising collaboration, partnership and extensive interaction amongst researchers and policy-practitioners, as well as being a **‘contract’** organisation engaged in the commissioning, production, delivery and dissemination of research’

i.e. a strategy of engagement

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Project implications (2): Strategic approaches

1. Adopt and promote engagement as a core model, principle and practice
2. Engage around research agendas and research funding
3. Engage around the conduct of research
4. Engage around research dissemination and utilisation
5. Engage in wider policy processes
6. Promote local level collaboration
7. Focus on research synthesis
8. Promote skills development in research-policy linkages

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Project implications (3): Specific options – see the 24 options in the Research & Policy Bulletin (now available)

Selected examples

- Create an AHURI funding program to support demonstration projects of innovative strategies to achieve evidence informed housing policy
- Develop ‘engagement’ performance indicators for AHURI Ltd and AHURI Research Centres
- Develop a program of AHURI linkage research projects, similar to ARC linkage grants
- Develop end-of-project workshops designed to explore policy implications and opportunities for research utilisation

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Project implications (3): Specific options – see the 24 options in the Research & Policy Bulletin (now available)

Selected examples

- Develop effective in-house processes for research awareness and utilisation
- Experiment with research-policy workshops on topical issues targeted to specific groups of policy participants
- Develop a framework to encourage engagement at the Research Centre/State and Territory level
- Give high priority to funding research projects that synthesise research for housing policy

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The next steps?

- Presentations on the project to joint seminars of housing departments and AHURI research centres, PRWG and SCIH
- AHURI Strategic Planning workshop in early-2006

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The crux of the issue: contracting *and* networking

- As a ‘contracting’ organisation, AHURI needs to continue to refine its processes to effectively aggregate research demand and supply.
- Should AHURI now build on these processes by adopting ‘engagement’ as an explicit strategy for enhancing research-policy linkages?
- This would mean that AHURI would now focus on becoming a fully-fledged ‘network organisation’, committed to building networks, developing partnerships, improving communication and promoting interaction between researchers and policy practitioners.